

2. "Our Rights as Workingmen":  
Class Traditions and Collective Action  
in a Nineteenth-Century Railroad Town,  
Hornellsville, N.Y., 1869–82

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Just after the collapse of the 1877 railroad strikes, journalist J. A. Dacus began his timely book, *Annals of the Great Strikes*, with the observation: "Republican government in this country has just been subjected to a strain greater than any which our system has been before required to sustain."<sup>1</sup> Dacus was hardly alone in seeking the causes that underlay the unprecedented railroad strikes of the summer of 1877. A special commission appointed by the Pennsylvania legislature conducted extensive hearings into the causes of the "riots." A score of contemporary journals carried analyses. The strikes prompted Allan Pinkerton to add a second volume to what eventually became his celebrated series *Great Detective Stories*. Newspaper coverage during and after the strike had been so massive—in some dailies little other news was carried as the strikes unfolded—that public officials, businessmen, and subsequently historians found much fodder for analysis.

This spasm of self-reflection produced a litany of explanations from which most historians have hardly deviated. Contemporary observers generally concluded that the strikes had been spontaneous, spreading like wildfire from one center of discontent to the next. Depression conditions of low wages and deepening impoverishment had provided kindling, which in each instance easily ignited.<sup>2</sup> A number at the time assigned a critical role to tramps or other varieties of "outside agitators," particularly members of

the Workingmen's Party, whose lineal descent from the Paris Commune was commonly noted. Finally, the railroad strikes have been portrayed by their chroniclers as unprecedented and highly exceptional events. The tale, as it has been told, began on July 16, 1877, or in secret organizing during the weeks immediately preceding. It concluded in the last days of July, with an afterglow reaching into the early fall of 1877. Such a story abstracts the strikes from the social context of railroad workers' lives—the work experience and grievances acquired over many years, the traditions of collective organization and action the workers self-consciously built, the webs of culture and kinship that shaped their view of the world, the rhythms of the industry's growth and retrenchment, and the urban communities, small and large, that had grown to depend on it.<sup>3</sup>

One national pattern to the strikes is abundantly clear. Though news of the strikes did spread from one major rail center to another, the strike did not simply leap from Martinsburg, West Virginia, to Baltimore and thence to Pittsburgh, Chicago, and St. Louis. The strike had a morphology peculiar to locality and trunk line. Activity all along the Baltimore & Ohio, for instance, escalated almost simultaneously.<sup>4</sup> In Grafton, Keyser, Sir John's Run, Wheeling, and Cumberland, West Virginia, local committees met, recruited support from other workers—especially miners and boatmen—stopped freights, and intercepted troop trains. Some railroad workers moved between towns on the line as men collected at various strategic points to make a determined stand. Familiar with large sections of the trunk lines, they moved easily from one community to the next. As Herbert Gutman pointed out, support within particular communities for railroad workers well known to them as parishioners, clients, or consumers was readily forthcoming and not without precedent. And towns along the same trunk line had clear and well-established commercial ties among them.<sup>5</sup>

### Local Patterns: Hornellsville, N.Y.

For a span of several days in 1877, the name of a town in the southern tier of New York counties bordering on Pennsylvania made secondary headlines in most newspapers across the country. The events of the week in Hornellsville, though not taking on the proportions or the violence of the conflagrations in Baltimore or Pittsburgh or Chicago, were significant enough to warrant the dispatch of more than fifteen hundred members of the New York state militia. Erie Railroad officials knew Hornellsville all too well as a recurrent center of labor difficulties. And, once again, they found their road tied up by the actions of railroad men and their supporters in this small division town of several thousand souls.

Sparsely settled, and bypassed in the days of canal fever, the rolling, sometimes rugged hills of the southern tier New York counties reached an early, stable, and in places relatively prosperous level of agricultural development by the decades just before the Civil War. Steuben County lay roughly in the middle of the southern tier, buttressed to the south by Pennsylvania and to the north reaching virtually to the belt of commercial activity stimulated by the building of the Erie Canal. A town historian observed retrospectively, "The history of the growth of this village from a rural hamlet presents a long period of prosperity and general improvement. But the period of its rapid growth began with the construction of the New York and Erie Railroad."<sup>6</sup> From 1836, a quiet, relatively stagnant rural community began to be transformed into a prosperous "business" center. Few could have conceived the economic growth, let alone the social implications of industrial change that would follow in the wake of the "iron horse." But, even in 1870, despite rapid growth in its population to 5,837 and becoming the headquarters of three divisions on the Erie Railroad, Hornellsville remained smaller than two other Steuben County towns (Bath and Corning.) The decade of the 1870s, however, saw it grow by nearly 70 percent and leave the other towns in its wake.<sup>7</sup>

A new class of men had come with the railroad, swelling the town's population. A number of them, largely foreign and predominantly Irish, had done the initial construction and then sought livelihoods with the railroad they had built. Occupying shanties along the constructed route, they were not infrequently harassed by townspeople who feared and distrusted their presence in the area. Describing the hard physical work of railroad construction, John Reynolds, in his history of nearby Almond, wrote, "The horses were driven and pounded until they became exhausted, whereupon they were knocked in the head and rolled into the fill. The men were treated almost as badly."<sup>8</sup>

The foreign born predominated among some classes of railroad workmen, particularly laborers—in 1875, 72 percent of Hornellsville railroad laborers had been born in Ireland. But in the town generally in 1870, only 15 percent were foreign born, and of all railroad workers in 1875, only 31 percent were immigrants. The largest proportion of the community's swelling population had been born in the United States and had moved from other locales.<sup>9</sup>

Industrial change heralded by the coming of the railroad affected not only the size of the community and the composition of its population but the social organization of life within it. Artisan craftsmen of the earlier era, when the railroad was a mere dream in some people's minds, found their trades profoundly affected by the rise of an industrial economy. In 1855, there had been five local firms producing cabinets, furniture, or doors and sashes; they employed an average of four men, the largest employing five. By 1880, only two such manufacturers survived, but they employed fifty and sixty

men, respectively. In 1855, four manufacturers producing shoes and boots employed an average of four men each, the largest having ten. In 1855, one boot and shoe manufacturer employed 150 men.<sup>10</sup> The largest "factory," of course, came to be the railroad itself. In 1855, the repair shop of the N.Y. & E.R.R. employed thirty-eight. In 1879, the shops and roundhouses of the Erie employed 172 men. The best accounting of total railroad employment in the town is for 1875, when 743 men found employment in all departments and levels of skill.<sup>11</sup>

The clearest evidence of changing social relations in this "railroad town" came from the level of union organization among its workers, particularly its railroad workers. The community experienced early strikes among locomotive engineers in June 1854 and October 1856, the last being a particularly bitter one over work rules established by the road's superintendent. But the decade of the 1870s witnessed the greatest upsurge in industrial conflict. Major strikes occurred among railroad workers beginning in June 1869 and followed by strikes in December 1870, June 1871, August 1873, February 1874, July 1877, and August 1881. In all except the last two, the railroad workers achieved their demands, wholly or partially. While the major brotherhoods had local lodges organized in 1864 (engineers), 1874 (conductors), and 1876 (firemen), committees dominated by the lesser-skilled trades, particularly brakemen, invariably led the strikes. The brakemen also had a more permanent, if somewhat elusive, local organization, the Brakemen's Brotherhood.<sup>12</sup>

In the half-light of corporate capitalist development where expansion, fierce competition, and consolidation were the order of the day, railroads practiced the arts of survival in the highest form known. In 1885, Harvard economist Arthur Hadley described how railroads differed from other industries in this respect: "And railroads have not the refuge, available in most other lines of business, either of contracting their capital or of driving their competitors out of business. A railroad once built is come to stay. It can neither retire from business voluntarily, nor be forced to do so by any other competitor. Drive it into bankruptcy, and it only fights the more strongly and recklessly."<sup>13</sup> Backed to the wall again and again during the decades from 1850 to 1900, railroad corporations refined the financial mechanisms for refunding debts and placating bondholders, ever continuing the process of expansion and consolidation. As indebtedness grew throughout this period, so too did the pressure to generate a surplus that could be used to reduce fixed costs (interest on debt). It is not surprising that problems of management formerly relegated to lower levels came increasingly to occupy the attention of higher officials. Foremost among those problems was labor costs and, more broadly, labor relations.<sup>14</sup>

"The great principle upon which we all joined to act was to earn more and to spend less," wrote John Garrett, president of the Baltimore & Ohio, to Junius Morgan following the March 1877 meetings of presidents of the four major trunk lines.<sup>15</sup> Concretely, the conference produced the first effective rate pool among eastern trunk lines, one that determined mutually acceptable freight rates as well as the share of the trade each was to have. More ominously for workers was the decision that all four lines—Baltimore & Ohio, Pennsylvania, Erie, and New York Central—would reduce wages by 10 percent across the board. That such an agreement had been reached was later denied by Tom Scott, president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, but historians have little doubt that the wave of wage cutting had been planned in March. For that matter, such coordinated wage cuts had appeared as early as 1873 when the depression had begun.<sup>16</sup>

Besides wage cuts, other options for increasing net earnings beckoned railroad managers in the 1870s. They might, for instance, raise labor productivity by increasing freight carried while holding costs steady. In the decade of the 1870s the rate of increase in freight hauled rose much faster than new mileage constructed.<sup>17</sup> Corporations operated more, larger, and faster trains. Indeed, the issue of "doubleheaders" (two engines pulling one, longer train) precipitated the 1877 strike on the Pennsylvania.<sup>18</sup> Doubleheaders had numerous advantages for management. Labor costs could be cut; half as many brakemen and conductors were required. Of equal importance, the load could be increased on uphill grades, for instance from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia. The *Hornell Daily Times* reported in 1879 that "[t]he Erie Road will lessen the number of freight trains by doubling the number of cars in each and stationing a pushing engine to help them over the grades east and west of Goshen. Each train will hereafter consist of fifty cars. The danger of collisions will be greatly reduced."<sup>19</sup> The report made no mention of the employees whose jobs would be eliminated and the increased danger in the work of those who remained. Of New England railroads during this period, historian Edward Kirkland has written, "Pay load increased more rapidly than dead weight, trains carried a greater tonnage without a proportionate multiplication of cars; maintenance and handling costs did not increase. Hazards to workers did."<sup>20</sup>

Brakemen on the major trunk lines faced constant pressure for the reduction of their crews. On the Erie, brakemen had successfully stopped an order reducing their number from four to three through timely strikes in 1869 and in 1874. On the Pennsylvania, they were not so successful in preventing the use of "doubleheaders," though in the course of the 1877 strike company officials may have asked themselves more than once whether their measures really cut costs (damage to company property during the strike totaled more than

five million dollars).<sup>21</sup> The issue persisted. Just seven months after the strike in 1877, the Erie Railroad, after years of resistance, introduced the "Westinghouse Air Brake" on its trains, thereby reducing their need for brakemen.<sup>22</sup> In 1881, brakemen in Hornellsville again struck, along with other men, to restore the fourth man to crews of brakemen (among other demands); they were defeated. And, in 1884, brakemen on a western line acquired by the Erie struck against the reduction of brakemen on a train from three to two!<sup>23</sup>

Trade organizations, or brotherhoods, had been founded in Hornellsville for all of the running trades by 1875. The engineers organized early in 1864, though some organization may have preceded even that date, as evidenced by the strikes of 1854 and 1856. They possessed a hall, met weekly, and provided for members' beneficial and social needs. The conductors appear to have organized formally in 1874 as Division No. 3 in the Order of Railway Conductors. Newspaper accounts mention semiweekly meetings and an annual ball among their activities. The firemen formed Lodge #2 of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen in 1876 and apparently played a central role in organizing the national Brotherhood (Lodge #1 was in Port Jervis, New York, also on the Erie. Local firemen held major national offices for the first three years of the brotherhood's life; they possessed their own hall and met weekly.<sup>24</sup>

The Brakemen's Brotherhood became the most interesting and elusive organization of the running trades. Lodge #1 organized in Hornellsville in 1873. Evidence survives of an earlier "union" of brakemen dating from the summer of 1869.<sup>25</sup> The brotherhood held its "1st Annual Convention" at Hornellsville in January 1875 with representatives of three lodges attending—Hornellsville, Port Jervis, and a third, not identified. The brotherhood appears to have succeeded the earlier "union" of brakemen, which had existed in Hornellsville and Port Jervis as brakemen sought to extend their organization to other roads. In certain respects it followed the model of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers; it possessed its own hall, met weekly, and provided the services of a beneficial society to its members. But in significant ways it diverged from the engineers' organizational style. Brakemen were central figures in all of the major strikes of the 1870s. Their brotherhood, once organized in 1873, provided an organizational vehicle for industrial action. Most important, the Brakemen's Brotherhood seems never wholly to have been confined to brakemen but rather from the outset assumed the form of a nascent industrial union of railroad workers.

A prominent conductor, W. L. Collins, served as first president and chief organizer. In January 1876, members of the brotherhood recognized him in a lighthearted, surprise ceremony for his valuable service to the brotherhood. A mock arrest by a local policeman as Collins stepped off his train brought

him to the Brakemen's Hall. There, charges consisting of three parts were read: "did aid and assist in organizing the Brakemen's Brotherhood," "did take an active part in organizing a Grand Division of the Brotherhood," and "did travel through the West and Southern states as far as Florida during the fall of 1875 and at different times and in many places represent the organization known as the Brakemen's Brotherhood." As a "sentence," members and their wives presented him with "a magnificent tea set."<sup>26</sup>

An interview with a "veteran engineer" in 1878 revealed additional details about the breadth of this organization of "brakemen." He reported that "its members are not all brakemen as the name of the union would imply. There are many locomotive engineers among the members. . . ." In addition, he said, the brotherhood numbered "among its members thousands of trackmen and workmen in the shops."<sup>27</sup> Its extreme secrecy left many observers puzzled as to the precise size of the organization, but in the aftermath of the strike of 1877, they believed its influence to be extensive indeed. The "veteran engineer" commented that, "The Brakemen's Union is strongest in the West. Its members are on nearly every railroad in Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. There are only a few members on the Erie Road east of Hornellsville. The Union has a strong membership on the N.Y. Central and on the Lake Shore."<sup>28</sup>

From a single lodge of roughly 150 men, the Brakemen's Brotherhood grew in a short space of time to be an extensive industrial union. As late as 1881, a *New York Times* reporter discovered "meetings of members of the Trainmen's Union" in communities all along the Erie.<sup>29</sup> "A prominent officer of this organization, whose membership includes nearly every department of railway service and whose influence extends to every state and territory in the Union, says the association was never in a better condition than at present to begin a strike."<sup>30</sup> The Hornellsville city directories for 1883 and 1887 list the Brakemen's Brotherhood without naming its officers, as had been done in 1875; "no regular place of meeting" is its only entry. The Great Strike of 1877 clearly marked a significant turning point, but the brotherhood's industrial character had already been shaped by forms of interunion cooperation that had emerged in Hornellsville in the context of conflict with Erie management.

Strikes of railroad workers at Hornellsville occurred with remarkable frequency over a period of slightly more than ten years, roughly coinciding with the decade of the 1870s. Though the particular issue varied, the strategy and style of organization showed continuity from one strike to the next. And generally the railroad workers were successful in achieving their demands.

Several features are apparent from the course of the strikes. Brakemen played a central role in nearly every one. Other trades showed an increasing tendency to act with the brakemen, initially in supporting roles, later adding

Table 2.1. Railroad Strikes, Hornellsville, New York, 1869–81

Date	Trades	Issues	Outcome
June 1869	Brakemen	regular payment; reduction in crews	Success
Oct. 1869	Machinists	back pay	Success
Dec. 1870	Brakemen, Engineers, Switchmen	resisting wage reduction	Part success
June 1871	Brakemen	resisting wage cut; new men	Unknown
Aug. 1873	Brakeman and others	free passes; same time as engineers on road	Success
Feb. 1874	Brakemen, others	crew reduction; wage increase; passes	Success
July 1877	general	discharge of grievance cmte.; and other	Defeat
Aug. 1881	Brakemen, Trackmen, Switchmen	restore 1877 wage cuts	Defeat

demands of their own. A broad range of demands characterized the later strikes in particular, and though they reflected the interests of particular trades, all of the trades stood behind all of the demands. The strike of 1874 illustrates the way in which the company initially conceded on all issues except a wage increase for trackmen, which they promised for later in the spring. The firemen, brakemen, and switchmen broke off negotiations and insisted that “now was the accepted time.”<sup>31</sup> The company then conceded the trackmen’s wage increase as well.

Finally, the strikes succeeded wholly or at least partially prior to 1877, and even in 1877 the strikers won on a few minor issues. But on the major point—the Erie’s discharge of the grievance committee—they lost. That defeat and the strike of 1881, which also ended in defeat, produced severe consequences. The 1881 strike departed in significant ways from a tradition of handling grievances that had been forged in the conflicts of the previous decade.

What was that tradition and what values underlay it? In February 1874 the *Hornellsville Tribune* reported that the men had “declined to work and the usual strategic movement of removing coupling pins was resorted to.”<sup>32</sup> A report of the strike of December 1870 had described the same activity early on the first morning of the strike: “[The strikers] commenced operations by uncoupling the cars and secreting the coupling pins, and as fast as a freight train entered the yard it was seized and uncoupled, the coupling irons were secretly and expeditiously disposed of, their brakemen joining the crowd.”<sup>33</sup>

Operating in large groups, railroad workers in this manner stopped all movement of trains through the community and, because Hornellsville was the major switching point between the eastern and western divisions, all traffic on the Erie came to a virtual standstill. And in a similar manner four years later, "All of the first class cars of the company were stored on the side tracks in the yard at this place and together with the freight cars were in a disabled condition, owing to the removal of brake wheels."<sup>34</sup> Typically, the men allowed an engine and a postal car to pass, after the freight and passenger cars had been removed, "so as not to bring down the wrath of Uncle Sam." Local police were wholly unable to stop the action. In 1870, the sheriff and a posse of deputies deployed on the company grounds but were "unable to do anything as the men were quiet and orderly and claimed to be still in the service of the company. . . ."<sup>35</sup>

Company officials after a day or two invariably arrived and attempted, despite the strike, to move a train out of the yard. In 1870 and 1877 this was done with the assistance of state militia. Invariably at this point the solidarity of the trades received an important test. The extent of support given by the engineers, who were usually not an organized part of the strike, proved critical. They frequently claimed that the track was dangerous, rails having been removed (which was usually true), and refused to take out trains under those conditions. In 1881, when brakemen, still suffering the effects of 1877, did not initially join the strike led by switchmen, the company ordered a crew of brakemen to make up a train in the yard and run it out. As the *Hornell Daily Times* reported, "They refused to go out unless the train were made up for them. The next crew was called upon but declined to 'jump' the first. In this manner seven crews refused to make up the train. . . ."<sup>36</sup>

If company officials succeeded in mustering a crew to move a train, sometimes under the protection of militia, the strikers over the years consistently employed a number of strategies. The crews were heckled, cajoled, harassed, and persuaded to leave their trains. If a crew persisted, small bands of strikers kept ahead of the cautiously moving train as it left town, removing rails, leaving obstacles on the track, each time requiring the train to stop and repair the damage, and each stop creating an opportunity for the strikers to create further obstacles.

Trains leaving town heading west had to climb a steep grade just outside the town limits. In 1870, 1874, and 1877, railroad workers and their families and supporters carried buckets of soft soap to the steepest part of the grade and soaped the rails. There they waited in a large crowd—men, women, and children. As the train reached the soaped rails and lost speed, its wheels slipping, men mounted the train in large numbers, forcibly set the brakes,

and removed coupling pins, sending the cars careening back into the railroad yard. The militia did not pose an insurmountable obstacle to the men as they carried out their strategy; in some cases, fraternization weakened the militiamen's resolve; in others, the strikers and their supporters simply outwitted the militia. "On Sunday an attempt was made to get out a freight train going west, which was defeated several times, once by the old brakemen coolly taking their places at the brakes, which was done so that the troops guarding it supposed that they belonged there, and on reaching the steep grade, the brakes were all tightly set, and as the track had been soaped it came to a stand. . . ."<sup>37</sup>

The organization of the strikers extended beyond the direct action of preventing the movement of trains. Strikers sought to maintain discipline in their own ranks, to provide for the needs of passengers stranded by the blockade, and to build support with occupying troops and the community. Nearly every observer mentioned the remarkable discipline of the railroad workers; their reports intimate that this was no accident but rather the result of deliberate efforts on the part of "the committee." In 1874, the *Hornellsville Tribune* reported, "There was one noticeable thing during the strike. Not a drunken man was seen around the railway, all was orderly and a stranger would scarcely have suspected that a serious strike was in progress. This was due in great measure to the prosecutions of the committee, who visited every saloon and barroom and requested that no liquor be sold to a railway man during the progress of the strike, a request that was pretty generally granted and observed."<sup>38</sup> Another reporter observed that they conducted themselves with a seriousness reminiscent of Quakers.

The strikers sought to establish friendly relations with the occupying troops, and the evidence suggests they succeeded. Reporters noted that they seemed always to be well informed in advance of troop movements. The *New York Tribune* said that the Fifty-fourth Regiment was "openly in sympathy with the mob."<sup>39</sup> A sentry said he observed the strikers bringing cigars and whiskey at 3:00 A.M. for a sergeant to give the men on duty. In 1877, a group of strikers intercepted a troop train several miles before it reached Hornellsville. "There about twenty men approached the engine waving a red flag. At the same time it was seen that a rail had been torn from the track a short distance ahead. As the train stopped, several men sprang upon the engine, drew a pin from one of the connecting rods and ordered the fireman to go with them. This he did, and the gang passed along the train, assuring the troops that there was no trouble and they wished to be on friendly terms with them."<sup>40</sup>

The strike of 1877 presented more formidable organizational problems for the men on strike than had earlier strikes. Occupation of the town by more

than 1,500 state troops made it difficult to move in and around the railroad yard. The arrest of key leaders and the report that an additional fifty to one hundred warrants had been issued in New York City, as well as news of the \$500 reward, forced the strikers to operate from camps outside of town. At night, on the hillsides around the town, "scores of moving lanterns gave evidence of [the strikers] vigilance and activity."<sup>41</sup> By day they surveyed the railway yard through field glasses to anticipate the movement of trains. They had a prearranged system of signals by flashing lights from one hill to the next. The *New York Tribune* reported that "in different portions of the woods, and not remote from the line of the Road, they had over half a dozen camps, subsisting mainly on raw pork, cracks, bread and water. Every preparation had been made for a long siege, and the camp had been provisioned by breaking open and plundering the freight cars in the yard." A reporter visiting the camps noted that nearly every man had a revolver, and in addition, "fully 200 had rifles or muskets, and two small cannon formed the artillery strength." One man in the camps, when interviewed after the strike, said, "When we started this strike two weeks ago, three hundred of us took a solemn oath not to drink a drop of intoxicating liquor until the matter was settled, and to use all means in our power to prevent the destruction of the company's property. We did not see any necessity for the militia being sent here, and had they provoked us by firing on any of our men, we would have never yielded until all were killed."<sup>42</sup> One reporter for the *New York Sun* concluded that "fighting the strikers is much like Indian warfare, so secret and quick are their movements."<sup>43</sup> Indeed, a rumor had it that one hundred Indians from the Salamanca reservation had joined the strikers.

A delegated committee of strikers, representing the various trades, carried on negotiations with some level of management, which varied from one strike to the next, depending on the seriousness of the issues. The strikers met frequently en masse to hear reports of their committees, and in some cases they delegated additional members, numbering as many as thirty, to participate in the negotiations.

## Industrial Organization

A new form of organization emerged during the struggles of the 1870s based on a sustained ability of diverse trades to cooperate in collective action around common grievances. At some point, the Brakemen's Brotherhood, which had consistently played a critical role in bringing the various trades together when action was demanded, began to take on the character of an industrial union. It may have been only in the months after the 1877 strike,

and with the failure of the Engineers' and Firemen's Brotherhoods to support their fellow railroad workers, that engineers and firemen formally joined the Brakemen's Brotherhood. But probably well before 1877, the Brakemen's Brotherhood functioned on behalf of less-skilled railroaders, particularly trackmen and switchmen.<sup>44</sup>

The important point is that industrial solidarity took shape long before its formal organization. Within the structure of separate brotherhoods lay the seeds of industrial organization. In some communities, like Hornellsville, they germinated into full-bloomed reality; in others, they may have been nipped in the bud. The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers reached a crisis point after the loss of the Boston & Maine and the Reading strikes in early 1877. By July, the BLE had moved away from any support of industrial militancy, purging those elements from its ranks, even if that meant in the short-run crippling locals such as Division #47 at Hornellsville.<sup>45</sup> In November 1878, P. M. Arthur, grand chief engineer of the BLE, wrote,

I am aware that there is a strong prejudice existing in some sections of the country against our organization, which has been created to a great extent by the hasty, ill-advised, unwarranted actions of a portion of the members and the strikes. We have no desire to conceal or cover up the misdeeds of the members. Many of them have done wrong, and we have no apology to make or excuse to offer for them. They have disgraced themselves, their families, and the society of which they were members. It is mortifying to think that we had such characters in our midst, and I hope we are forever rid of them.<sup>46</sup>

An engineer at Port Jervis was asked several years later by a reporter, "Is there anything new in brotherhood circles?" He replied,

I'm not a brotherhood man and can tell you nothing about them. [He was then asked why he was not one of the brotherhood.] Oh, I'm alright so far as being a sympathizer with labor organizations is concerned, but I don't like Pete Arthur for a cent, and I don't like the way the brotherhood has always had of holding itself aloof, when other departments of the service were in trouble. . . . None for me at present. But if the brotherhood went out to aid in a good cause, I'd never mount a footboard until we went back together.<sup>47</sup>

After 1877, the leadership narrowed and tightened up the structure of the brotherhoods, and industrial organization began to take formal shape at a new, more secretive, "subterranean" level. The Brakemen's Brotherhood held a ball in early 1878, its last public function reported in the local press of Hornellsville.<sup>48</sup> In June, the *Evening Tribune* reported, "There are wild rumors flying in the air that the communists are gathering in force on the outskirts

of the village.”<sup>49</sup> In October the papers reported that a notice mysteriously appeared in the Buffalo papers calling for a meeting of the Brakemen’s Brotherhood, but when reporters investigated, they could find no room let for the occasion.<sup>50</sup> The veteran engineer previously quoted was interviewed in Jersey City that same month, and the papers quoted him affirming the Brakemen’s Brotherhood’s extreme secrecy and considerable growth since 1877, with membership reaching into the thousands.

Railroad workers were not alone in their movement toward industrial organization, and the Brakemen’s Brotherhood was not the only industrial union of railroad workers. The Knights of Labor, still operating under the label \* \* \* \* \*, underwent its first phase of rapid growth, particularly in the coal regions of eastern and western Pennsylvania.<sup>51</sup> Terence Powderly, who earlier in the decade had attempted to push the Machinists’ and Blacksmiths’ Union toward opening their ranks to other railroad shopmen, had organized a Knights Local Assembly of railroad machinists in Scranton.<sup>52</sup> By 1878 reports of the Knights appeared in the national press with some regularity. Although the numbers reported, with descriptions couched in hyperbole and allusions to “Molly Maguires,” were undoubtedly exaggerated, the phenomenon of growth in industrial consciousness certainly was not. The *New York Times* referred in July 1878 to a report of a Philadelphia meeting of local “clans.” “The report shows an increase of 800,000 members since July, 1877, the most numerous class being former members of different railroad organizations which have disbanded since the strike. This is the foundation of the new political party.”<sup>53</sup> Although direct connections between the Knights of Labor and the Brakemen’s Brotherhood cannot be proved in this period of secret organization, we can hardly imagine them as wholly unrelated. If not organizationally linked, they certainly sprang from common needs, and in 1878–79 found expression in a common political movement, which demonstrated particular strength in the southern tier of New York counties through which the Erie ran.<sup>54</sup>

## The “Rights of Workingmen” and the Question of Control

“Riot, Revolution, Anarchy” blared the headlines of the *New York Tribune* in the midst of the Great Strike of 1877. “We only wanted our rights as workingmen” wrote Barney Donahue a few days later from the Ludlow Street jail in New York City. Both observations held some measure of truth.<sup>55</sup> At the time, many Americans would have agreed that the country had never been so close to fundamental social revolution. And yet the demands of the workingmen seemed humble indeed alongside the upheaval they had stirred.

Officers of the Erie and other major trunk lines operated under new pressures in the depression of the 1870s. Court-ordered reorganization demanded higher earnings in relation to fixed investment; operating costs had to be reduced. Competition between trunk lines had grown so destructive to their mutual interests that some degree of rationalization seemed required. If roads were to grow and prosper, the lines insisted on a free hand to increase productivity, and that implied new labor-saving measures and a more tractable labor force. Driven to the wall by overcapitalization, with the agitation and intrigue of foreign and domestic stockholders ever at their backs, railroad officers became ruthless in their pursuit of "greater economy."<sup>56</sup> In a joint letter to the Supreme Court of the State of New York in 1878, the officers of the Erie listed their accomplishments "in answer to allegations" made by a group of stockholders:

The reductions in our rates of wages which took effect July 1st, 1877, in which month the almost national labor difficulties recurred, have resulted in an average monthly savings of \$55,000. In addition to these gains in items readily specified, we believe the discipline of the employees is improved, more rigid systems of accountability are enforced, and the line of service is more harmonious and that these results have been accomplished, particularly during the past year, notwithstanding the efforts of opposing parties to create disaffection.<sup>57</sup>

Underlying the apparently simple issue of a fair wage lay fundamental questions of discipline and "the right of the company to operate its own property," as a vice president of the Erie had put it.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, persuaded that the company would not under any conditions rescind the 10 percent wage reduction, the committee of brakemen, firemen, switchmen, and trackmen that had been sent to New York to negotiate with President Jewett recommended that the wage reduction not be resisted at that time. The strike came not over the issue of wages, but over managerial authority and the right of a workers' organization to represent their interests, when the company discharged the entire grievance committee for absenting themselves from their duties. Mr. Taylor, a division superintendent, gave the following account of what happened. He noted,

That these men asked leave of absence to visit New York and lay their grievances before Receiver Jewett, and he refused, supposing it was a private matter, and not the action of a regular meeting of the Brotherhood. They then informed him that they would go anyhow, and were informed by him that they did so at their peril, and he discharged them. This was made necessary in order to maintain discipline; and while he was free to admit that they were good railroad men, and efficient in their positions, rather than be forced to reinstate them by the strikers, he would resign his position.<sup>59</sup>

The higher officers of the Erie stood steadfastly behind the superintendent; compromise was apparently possible on all other, minor issues, but not this one. "The company will not make any concessions whatever [on this issue] to the men, and if it is necessary to close the road until the company's authority is re-established then the road will be closed," said assistant receiver Sherman on arrival in Hornellsville.<sup>60</sup>

The strikers perceived the company's objectives as part of a deliberate plan to dismantle the basis of their "control" over the conditions of their work, namely their organization and even the cultural foundations of their class. Hornellsville strike leader Barney Donahue wrote the *Irish World*:

It seemed to me that the officers of the road were bound to break the spirit of the men, and any and all organizations they belonged to. The company had a fixed policy to pursue in common with other trunk lines, and they were making the experiment then and there—all of their movements were and are well understood. . . . They [the workers] also knew by bitter experience that all organizations among themselves, for mutual improvement, were opposed, as thousands of men on railroads in the United States can testify to. They were to be squeezed out of all organizations they belonged to. Many of the men belong to Masonic and Odd Fellowship societies and also various societies belonging to the Catholic Church, so if the men had not the money to pay their dues, of course they would have to withdraw from all those associations, from all fellowship for mutual aid with fellow men, *leaving them a heterogeneous mass, without civil or social aid.* [emphasis added]<sup>61</sup>

The control that railroad employees in Hornellsville exercised was real. It formed the basis of what they regarded as their "rights." An examination of the issues that precipitated the strikes throughout the 1870s provides a sense of what those rights were: a fair wage, regularly paid; a job secure against reduction in crews; promotion according to some fair standard, such as length of service; the right to organize; and equitable treatment of the trades in such things as free passes and payment for time over the road.

Clearly, from the record of strikes, such rights were under fundamental challenge by railroad companies. Companies saw even mere wage demands as a challenge to their authority. As President Griswold of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy said: "We should at once show that the row is not a question of money, but as to who shall manage the road."<sup>62</sup> It is also clear that until 1877 the railroad workers at Hornellsville defended their control with great success. The strike of 1877 became a showdown of the first magnitude. The discharge of the grievance committee was a direct attack on the collective organization of the workers, and their organization had become the basis of their control.<sup>63</sup>

It would be incorrect to paint a picture of railroadmen's sense of their own rights as wholly static in defense against the encroachments of capital. From one strike to the next, the solidarity among the trades grew, and the contentious issues multiplied. Industrial organization was rooted in an increasingly stable community, with proliferating "organizations for mutual benefit." Political solidarity in local elections grew gradually during the decade, ultimately taking the form of a "workingmen's party" (Greenback-Labor). We have little concrete evidence of where the railroad workers themselves saw class organization leading. We do not know what lay at the heart of their developing claims. But it is fair to assume that their social world and their aspirations changed significantly over the decade through their own organizational initiatives and in response to the increasing pressures of corporate capitalist growth. In the midst of negotiations in the strike of 1877, railroadmen not only fought to protect established "rights" but also raised new conditions to their acceptance of the 10 percent wage reduction. Switchmen would accept the reduction only if ten hours constituted a day. Firemen would accept it only if promotion were henceforth strictly according to age. Trackmen would not accept it at all, and in addition demanded overtime. Brakemen were prepared to accept a 10 percent cut, if they were paid overtime for time they were abandoned out on the line.<sup>64</sup> These and more became "rights of workingmen" as well.<sup>65</sup> Through their own collective organization and action, railroadmen built a tradition of control that allowed them to glimpse a future that might promise a still greater measure of security and dignity.

## Notes

1. J. A. Dacus, *Annals of the Great Strikes* (Chicago: L. T. Palmer, 1877), 1.
2. General historical studies that reflect these interpretive trends include Robert V. Bruce, *1877: Year of Violence* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1959), and, to a lesser extent, Philip S. Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877* (New York: Monad Press, 1977), and Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 1997). A more recent analysis that emphasizes the "spontaneous" character of the 1877 strikes is Glenn Stephens, "Remodeling Collective Violence: James Tong's Rational Choice Model and the Great Strikes of 1877," *Political Research Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (June 1995): 348-49.
3. Over the years we have been blessed by a generation of local studies, including new work represented in this collection, that examine particular community contexts and enlarge the interpretive canvas of the strikes and their causes: Nick Salvatore, "Railroad Workers and the Great Strike of 1877: The View from a Small Midwestern City," *Labor History* 21 (fall 1980): 522-45, on Terre Haute; David Roediger, "'Not Only the Ruling Classes to Overcome, but Also the So-Called Mob': Class, Skill and Community in the St. Louis General Strike of 1877," *Journal of Social History* 19, no. 2 (1985): 213-39, on St. Louis;

David O. Stowell, *Streets, Railroads, and the Great Strike of 1877* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), on Albany, Buffalo, and Syracuse; Shelton Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers: The Pattern of Railroad Labor Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Richard Schneirov, "Chicago's Great Upheaval in 1877," *Chicago History* 9, no. 1 (1980): 2-17, on Chicago. For an instructive study that gets behind the supposed "spontaneity" of collective action to its social context, see Leopold Haimson, "The Problem of Social Stability in Urban Russia, 1905-1907," *Slavic Review* 23, no. 4 (December 1964): 619-42, and 24, no. 1 (March 1965), 1-22. See also Joan W. Scott, *The Glassworkers of Carmaux* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974).

4. Bruce, 1877, 74-92.

5. Herbert Gutman, "Trouble on the Railroads in 1873-74: Prelude to the 1877 Crisis?" *Labor History* 2, no. 2 (spring 1961): 215-35. Towns on the Erie Railroad in southern New York and northeastern Pennsylvania included Port Jervis, Susquehanna Depot (Pa.), Hornellsville, and Buffalo.

6. I. W. Near, *History of Steuben County and Its People* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1911), 324.

7. Bureau of the Census, *Population Statistics* (Washington, D.C., 1850-90).

8. John F. Reynolds, *The Almond Story: The Early Years* (Hornell, N.Y.: J. F. Reynolds, 1962), 99. On canal and railroad construction workers in the antebellum period, see Peter Way, *Common Labour: Workers and the Digging of North American Canals, 1780-1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

9. Bureau of the Census, Manuscript Schedules (Washington, D.C., 1870). New York State, Secretary of State, *Census of the State of New York for 1875*, Manuscript Schedules, Steuben County, Hornellsville Township.

10. New York State, Census, Manufacturing Schedule, 1855. Bureau of the Census, Manufacturing Schedule, 1880.

11. W. W. Clayton, *History of Steuben County, N.Y.* (Philadelphia: Lewis Peck Co., 1879). New York State, Census, Population Schedules, 1875.

12. Edward H. Mott, *Between Ocean and Lakes: The Story of the Erie* (New York: J. S. Collins, 1901), 115, 119. For the strikes from 1869 to 1881, see the accounts primarily in the local press: *Hornellsville Tribune* and the *Evening Tribune*.

13. Arthur T. Hadley, *Railroad Transportation: Its History and Laws* (New York: G. P. Putnam and Sons, 1885), 19-20.

14. For a discussion of these problems of railroad expansion, financial crisis, and corporate reorganization, see Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers*, 10-16; see also Alfred D. Chandler, *The Railroads: The Nation's First Big Business* (New York: Harcourt, 1965).

15. Peter Lyon, *To Hell in a Day Coach* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1968), 76.

16. State of Pennsylvania, General Assembly, Legislative Document, v. 5, Doc. 29, 1878 *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Railroad Riots in July, 1877* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Lane S. Hart, 1878). On the previous round of wage cuts, see Herbert Gutman, "Trouble on the Railroads in 1873-74: Prelude to the 1877 Crisis?" in Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 298-303.

17. Chandler, *The Railroads*, 13-14.

18. Bruce, 1877, 115-16.

19. *Hornell Daily Times*, April 12, 1879.

20. Edward C. Kirkland, *Men, Cities, and Transportation: A Study in New England History, 1820-1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948), 369.
21. Philip Slaner, "The Railroad Strikes of 1877," *Marxist Quarterly* 1 (April-June 1937): 227.
22. The saga of the delayed introduction of air brakes, which had been invented by George Westinghouse in 1868, is recounted in Emory R. Johnson and Truman W. Van Metre, *Principles of Railroad Transportation* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1902), 64; Henry G. Prout, *A Life of George Westinghouse* (New York: American Society of Mechanical Engineers, 1921), 32; and John F. Stover, *The Life and Decline of the American Railroad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 72.
23. *Evening Tribune* (Hornellsville), February 18, 1878; Stuart Daggett, *Railroad Reorganization* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1908), 54.
24. Information on the Brotherhoods in Hornellsville has been drawn from the lists of organizations in the city directories for 1875, 1877, and 1880, and from scattered references in the *Hornellsville Tribune*. On the organization of the BLF and Eugene V. Debs's early leadership, see Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).
25. *New York Times*, November 26, 1869.
26. Clipping from James P. Hogan Scrapbook, January 1876. The source is a scrapbook belonging to a former engineer with the Erie, James Hogan, who worked from the late 1870s until he was killed in the early twentieth century. Most of the clippings are not dated, but many describe events that can be approximately dated from other sources. (The scrapbook is in the possession of Rosemary Hogan of Hornell, N.Y.)
27. James P. Hogan Scrapbook; *New York World*, October 1878.
28. *Ibid.*
29. The names "Trainmen's Union" and "Brakemen's Brotherhood" were used interchangeably by the press in discussing the organization of railroadmen on the Erie. A "Trainmen Union" founded in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania, in late May 1877 became the leading force behind the strikes in Pittsburgh that summer and has received considerable attention from historians. Known largely through testimony before the Pennsylvania state legislative committee, which investigated the "riots" in Pennsylvania, it has consistently been assumed to have been a local and transitory phenomenon. I believe it was plausibly a local branch of the earlier Brakemen's Brotherhood that organized first on the Erie; there certainly were links of some sort between the two. Besides the evidence of the far-flung organizational efforts of Hornellsville brakemen earlier in the decade, there was direct telegraphic communication between the leadership of the strike on the Erie in Hornellsville and Pittsburgh. Barney Donahue, a leader of the strike on the Erie, was released from jail in New York City late in August 1877. Accompanied by the sheriff of Steuben County back to the county seat of Bath, Donahue made a point of refusing to take rail transportation—which would have forced him to travel through the northeast corner of Pennsylvania—because he feared additional charges in that state, though he had committed no illegal acts in other states; the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen (BRT) organized in 1886 and appears to have no direct lineage with the earlier efforts of brakemen to organize.
30. *New York Times*, August 21, 1881.

31. *Hornellsville Tribune*, March 6, 1874.

32. *Ibid.*, February 27, 1874.

33. *Ibid.*, December 23, 1870.

34. *Ibid.*, March 6, 1874.

35. *Ibid.*, December 23, 1870.

36. *Hornell Daily Times*, August 18, 1881.

37. *Hornellsville Tribune*, December 23, 1870.

38. *Ibid.*, March 6, 1874.

39. *New York Tribune*, July 30, 1877.

40. *New York Sun*, July 24, 1877.

41. *New York Tribune*, July 27, 1877.

42. *Ibid.*

43. *New York Sun*, July 24, 1877.

44. The impulse toward industrial organization clearly rose and subsided from time to time with changing conditions on the railroads, in the economy, and in the wider world of labor. In addition to the role played by the Knights of Labor in the mid-1880s, western railroad workers following the Great Burlington Strike of 1888 crafted a trades' federation and ultimately the American Railway Union in the early 1890s to provide a vehicle for such aspirations. See Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers*, 54–99.

45. The columns of the *Engineers' Monthly Journal* in 1878 had long lists of engineers expelled for "violating obligations," many of them from the Erie and at least fifty-nine from Division #47 at Hornellsville. See the monthly issues, March–May 1878. These, without question, appear to be engineers who directly participated in the 1877 strike.

46. *Engineers' Monthly Journal*, November 1878, 498.

47. Hogan scrapbook. Precise date of clipping is not known.

48. *Hornell Daily Times*, January 7, 1879 (a review of the major events of 1878).

49. *Evening Tribune* (Hornellsville), June 7, 1878.

50. *Ibid.*, October 9, 1878.

51. On the Knights of Labor and secrecy, see Robert E. Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil: The Culture of the Knights of Labor* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), and his *Knights Unhorsed: Internal Conflict in a Gilded Age Social Movement* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000); see also Jonathan Garlock, "A Structural Analysis of the Knights of Labor: Prolegomena to the History of the Producing Classes" (Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1974).

52. Powderly, in his autobiography *The Path I Trod* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 41–42, recalled how at the Louisville convention of the Machinists' and Blacksmiths' Union in 1874, he had pushed for a resolution to admit boilermakers, a resolution that was resoundingly defeated amid comments from the chair about the boilermakers' "untidy habits and lack of neatness in dress." Powderly angrily rushed up to the secretary's desk and inscribed the following poem to be presented as new business.

Aristocrats of Labor we,	The Carpenter and the molder, too
Are up on airs and graces.	The Mason and the miner,
We wear clean collars, cuffs and shirts	Must stand aside as we pass by,
Likewise, we wash our faces.	Than we there's nothing finer.

There's no one quite so good as we  
In all the ranks of labor.  
The boilermaker we despise,  
Although he is our neighbor.

But some day, some how things will change  
Throughout this glorious nation,  
And men of toil will surely meet  
In one great combination.

Like machinists and blacksmiths, so too among engineers and firemen, internal divisions over broader industrial sympathies ran deep.

53. Following the collapse of the strike in 1877, the Greenback-Labor Party showed surprising strength for the next year or two in local elections in many former hotbeds of railroad strike activity. This was certainly true of the southern tier of New York counties through which the Erie ran. On the Greenback-Labor Party, see John D. French, "'Reaping the Whirlwind': The Origins of the Allegheny County Greenback Labor Party in 1877," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 64, no. 2 (April 1981): 97–119; Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Gretchen Ritter, *Goldbugs and Greenbacks: The Antimonopoly Traditions and the Politics of Finance in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

54. Selig Perlman, "Upheaval and Reorganization (since 1876)," in J. R. Commons, *History of Labour in the United States*, vol. 2 (New York: MacMillan, 1918), 242.

55. *New York World*, July 31, 1877.

56. For a discussion of the general climate of railroad investment in these years, see Julius Gordinisky, *Transcontinental Railway Strategy, 1869–1893: A Study of Businessmen* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962), 226–55, 319–32; Albert Fishlow, "Productivity and Technological Change in the Railroad Sector, 1840–1910," in *Output, Employment, and Productivity in the United States after 1800*, Conference on Research in Income and Wealth, Studies in Income and Wealth, vol. 30 (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1966), 628–29; see also Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers*, 10–12, 100–103.

57. "Joint Letter (G. R. Blanchard & others) to Hon. H. J. Jewett in answer to allegations made in complaint of Charles Potter and others in the Supreme Court of New York," 12878, Miscellaneous Papers of the Erie Railroad Company, New York Public Library.

58. Gutman, "Trouble on the Railroads," 233.

59. *New York Tribune*, July 27, 1877.

60. *New York World*, July 22, 1877.

61. *Irish World*, August 18, 1877.

62. Thomas Cochran, *Railroad Leaders, 1845–1890* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), 180.

63. For a discussion of the place of control issues in railroad strikes for the remainder of the nineteenth century, see Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers*, 34–40; see also David Montgomery, "Strikes in Nineteenth-Century America," *Social Science History* 4, no. 1 (February 1980): 81–100.

64. *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, July 26, 1877.

65. Samuel Gompers may have put this expansive idea of workers' rights most forcefully when he spoke of "practical improvement" and "final emancipation," or when he told the World Labor Congress in 1893: "We want more school houses and less jails; more books

and less arsenals; more learning and less vice; more constant work and less crime; more leisure and less greed; more justice and less revenge; in fact, more of the opportunities to cultivate our better natures, to make manhood more noble, womanhood more beautiful and childhood more happy and bright," in Samuel Gompers, "What does labor want?" a paper read before the International Labor Congress, Chicago, September 1893, 4-5, Chicago Historical Society. See also David Montgomery, "Labor and the Republic in Industrializing America," *Le Mouvement Social*, 1980.